

## **The Love-Lock Charm: Folklore and Fashion**

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As inexpert on the subject of French fashion houses as I am, even I recognised the handbag of the woman passing me on the street as a Louis Vuitton. That was not what caught my attention though. It was, instead, the decorative chain running across its front, hung with keys and love-heart shaped padlocks. They looked very much like the objects I had spent the last few years researching – love-locks – but I could not be certain; I had only caught a brief glimpse of them. And so later that day I searched for “love-lock” on the Louis Vuitton website and quickly found what I was looking for: the “Twist MM LV Love Lock Charms handbag”. It is, the website explained, a handbag adorned with “a removable ornamental [sic] chain hung with locks, keys and other charms in silver and gold-tone metal.” Tellingly, there was no price. There was, however, a “You may also like” section on the webpage, featuring images of other Louis Vuitton handbags and accessories, such as keyrings, similarly incorporating love-locks into their names and designs.<sup>1</sup>

How had the twenty-first-century folklore motif of the love-lock become so well-established, both as a term and as a symbol, that it had been adopted by one of the most widely known luxury retail companies in the world? And what can this tell us, both about the establishment of the love-lock custom and about the relationship between folklore and fashion? These are the questions at the centre of this paper, which will begin by exploring the padlock’s history as a charm or pendant, before detailing the rise of the love-lock custom and consequent revival of the symbol within fashion.

### **The Padlock as Charm**

In magical practices, padlocks have a history of being employed as charms. The Museum of Witchcraft and Magic in Boscastle holds a miniature metallic padlock which they classify as a “protective amulet”, explaining that “Padlocks are widely used as protective amulets – they keep the things you value most safe from being lost or stolen: your partner’s love, your life, even your spirit”.<sup>2</sup> Two similar charms can be found in the Clarke Charms Collection of Scarborough Museum. One, collected locally in 1935, is described in its original record as having been “carried as an amulet to bring good luck”. The other is dated to 1914-1918 and is described as a “Padlock Amulet ... worn to bring good luck by a soldier during the European war”.<sup>3</sup> Clearly the practical purpose of the padlock – to secure – was being harnessed here ritually.

It was more common for the padlock to be associated with the binding of love, which again draws its symbolism from the utilitarian function of the object. Sophie Page, who makes an explicit connection between modern-day love-locks and medieval magic, writes that at the heart of medieval love magic “was the intention to bind another person with words, images and the invocation of a supernatural power, an approach that has some parallels with inscriptions and iconography on lovers’ gifts in the Middle Ages and today”.<sup>4</sup> The language of binding fits

the symbol of the padlock, and this is why it was a popular motif in medieval jewellery design: lockets in the shape of padlocks given as lovers' tokens to bind their love.

Examples of padlock pendants include several held in the British Museum. One is a fifteenth-century gold locket in the form of a padlock, bearing the French inscription “sauns repentir” (“without regret”).<sup>5</sup> Another is the Fishpool Padlock Locket, which was found amongst a probable fifteenth-century hoard of medieval gold coins and other jewellery in Fishpool, Nottinghamshire.<sup>6</sup> This padlock locket is gold, and bears floral imagery and the French inscription “de tout” on one side and “mon cœur” on the other: “with all my heart”. It is very small, only 0.6 inches in length, and is attached to a key by a chain. As well as being decorative, it was probably used to link two ends of a chain together.<sup>7</sup> A similar but slightly smaller gold padlock locket, likely of a similar date, was also discovered in Newark.<sup>8</sup>

A comparable example may be found in statue form. Around the neck of the alabaster effigy of Jane Cockayne, believed to have died in the 1440s, in a church in Ashbourne, Derbyshire, is a chain joined at the front by a rectangular object, which John Cherry believes to have been a padlock.<sup>9</sup> Another comparable padlock is one depicted on a fifteenth-century signet ring's oval bezel held by the Museum of London, bearing the French inscription “ma souveraigne” (“my queen”).<sup>10</sup> Later examples include a nineteenth-century gold, diamond encrusted brooch in the form of a padlock hung with a heart and a key, made in England; a gold brooch set with pink topazes and pearls, with pendants in the forms of padlock, key, and heart, also from nineteenth-century England; and another brooch in the shape of a padlock and key set with diamonds and sapphires.<sup>11</sup> A locket held by the British Museum, believed to have belonged to Marie Antoinette, bears a small gold padlock pendant with a key, while the Horniman Museum contains a twentieth-century English love token pendant featuring a miniature padlock and key on either side of two interlocking hearts.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Love-Lock Custom**

The symbol of the padlock may have a history of usage in charms and jewellery, but it was the contemporary love-lock custom that sparked its revival in the twenty-first century. This is the custom whereby people, often couples, write their names or initials onto padlocks and then attach them to public structures, most often bridges. They then throw the keys into the river below to symbolise their commitment to each other; a vow to remain together forever (Figures 1 and 2).

The origins of this practice are unclear but residents of Vrnjačka Banja, Serbia, claim their assemblage on the Most Ljubavi (“Bridge of Love”) dates back to the First World War. However, it gained popularity following Italy's adoption of the custom in the 2000s, triggered by Federico Moccia's 2006 romantic novel *Ho voglia di te* (*I Want You*), in which a character attaches a padlock to the Ponte Milvio, Rome. This I identify as the spark, and the subsequent dissemination of the love-locking practice was rapid and geographically unbound, with accumulations emerging in locations as distant and varied as New York and Seoul, Paris and Taiwan, Melbourne and Bakewell. On the Pont des Arts in Paris, the accumulation of love-locks reached such quantities that one of the bridge's railings collapsed under their weight in

June, 2014, engendering debates worldwide about their removal and the banning of the practice. Today, some sites encourage the custom, others tolerate it, and others have criminalised it.

Considering the range of their dissemination, it is unsurprising that love-locks have featured in academic research from a variety of perspectives. Art historian Cynthia Hammond focuses on the assemblage in Pécs, Hungary, which dates to the 1980s; she illustrates how it can be viewed as representative of control and dissent in the city.<sup>13</sup> Urban scenographer Jekaterina Lavrinec classes the custom as an “urban ritual”, considering the bodily experiences of love-lock deposition.<sup>14</sup> Engineer Christian Walloth, describing love-locks as “emergent [i.e. unplanned and unpredictable] qualities”, explores the influence they have on urban development.<sup>15</sup> Artist Lachlan MacDowell considers love-locks within the context of street art, exploring deposition through the theory of stigmergy, whereby “urban practices cluster spatially, without direct coordination”.<sup>16</sup> While social scientist Kai-Olaf Maiwald adopts an objective–hermeneutic approach in his investigation into the symbolic meaning of “padlocking” at the Hohenzollern Bridge, Cologne.<sup>17</sup>

I have contributed a material culture approach to the corpus. Through online research, word-of-mouth, and research in the field, I have compiled data of over 500 locations worldwide in 62 different countries where people have affixed love-locks to bridges or other public structures, such as railings, fences, gates, and sculptures. This is no doubt only the tip of the iceberg. I have also catalogued over 700 love-locks removed from Leeds Centenary Bridge in 2016, and through conducting a site-specific investigation into the growth of a love-lock assemblage on a bridge in Manchester, from February, 2014 to the present, I have demonstrated the value of studying an assemblage during the process of its formation rather than at one static point in time.<sup>18</sup> In a forthcoming monograph, I explore the history and dissemination of love-locking, its use as a motif in popular culture, the commercialisation of the custom, and its heritage.

### **The Love-Lock as Fashion Motif**

Since love-locking’s establishment as a global folk custom, Louis Vuitton is not the only retailer to have incorporated the symbol of the love-lock into their designs. International jewellery manufacturer Pandora, wellknown for its customisable charm bracelets, sell several variations of explicitly described “love lock” charms. One, sold in the US for \$80, is described as: “Featuring two connected padlock hearts in sterling silver and 14K gold, this sweet charm is inspired by the tradition of sweethearts leaving padlocks in cities around the world to symbolise their everlasting love.”<sup>19</sup> In the UK, £40 gets you a love-lock ring (“Lock away feelings of love with this beautifully crafted sterling silver band ring”) and a matching pair of earrings for a further £35 (“Turn your promise of love into a commitment with this pair of sterling silver padlock-inspired earrings”).<sup>20</sup>

At the high end of the price spectrum is Tiffany & Co., who sell a range of “Love Lock” products: a “Love Lock Necklace” for £690, a “Love Lock Ring” for £460, a “Love Lock Bracelet” for £525, and a “Love Lock Hinged Bangle” for £1,150.<sup>21</sup> For those, like me, with

smaller jewellery budgets, high street retailer River Island sells a padlock pendant for £4 and JewelryWe, which sells through *Amazon*, offers “2pcs New Lovers Stainless Steel Heart Lock Love Bangle Bracelet & Key Tag Pendant Necklace Set” with an engraving option for £22.99 as well as a “Mother Gift Premium Heart Lock and Key Padlock Pendant on 31.5" Adjustable Leather Necklace Chain (with Gift Bag)” for £3.99. On *Etsy*, an online marketplace specialising in handmade items, Ohana Jewels Shop sells “Padlock Charm Huggie Hoop Earrings - Love Lock” for £10.52, and ButterflyBeads advertises “6 Love Lock Charms - Antique Silver Love Lock Charms - Zinc Alloy Love Lock Charms - Lead Free Love Lock Charms” for a mere 71p.<sup>22</sup>

The love-lock features as a fashion motif in more than handbags and jewellery. For \$195 you can purchase a Hermès “Twillby Locks of Love Tie”, which features a pattern of miniature padlocks on the front and miniature keys on the reverse.<sup>23</sup> French fashion brand Un Poco have designed a silk scarf featuring images of love-locks and Paris entitled “Love Lock Bridge” in their “Allusions to France” collection (the Pont des Arts being the most famous love-lock assemblage).<sup>24</sup> Love-lock cufflinks are for sale online, and sold in the giftshop of Casa di Giulietta, Verona – the purported “House of Juliet Capulet” of Shakespeare fame – are T-shirts bearing pictures of love-locks and keys. Other T-shirts are sold online adorned with images of love-locks and the Eiffel Tower, while Spreadshirt, a personalised clothing website, offers T-shirts with a vast variety of love-lock motifs, including some with written messages: “open your heart”, “lock for a reason”, “one heart one love forever”, “made for”, and “unlock me”.<sup>25</sup> There are even several baby-grow designs floating around online that incorporate the love-lock motif.

### **Folklore and Fashion**

Folklore clearly has the ability to impact fashion, and the love-lock is certainly not the first folk motif to have been translated into a fashion motif. The “folklore look”, for example, is a broad umbrella term that came into use in the 1970s, applied to fashion trends that draw on “traditional dress”, from the kaftan to the kimono, but particularly the “peasant dress”. Mocenco et al., for example, have explored Romanian folklore motifs in fashion, demonstrating how traditional costumes inspire modern designers, both Romanian, such as Adrian Oriano, and international, such as Yves Saint Laurent, whose fashion line “La blouse roumaine” drew on the Romanian traditional flax blouses.<sup>26</sup> Today in Britain, one example of the “folklore look” would be the flower crowns, reminiscent of the floral hats, caps, and garlands worn during May Day celebrations.<sup>27</sup> These have been revived in the 2010s as a music festival accessory, with one article in *The Guardian* noting that “Blooming headpieces are the accessory of the summer, with Beyoncé and Rihanna wearing them on the cover of *Vogue*”.<sup>28</sup>

Folkloric calendar customs have also been incorporated into seasonal fashions: the Christmas jumper for instance, dating back to at least the 1940s and adorned with anything from Santa Claus and reindeer to pairs of provocatively positioned Christmas puddings.<sup>29</sup> Easter bonnets are another. Linked to the custom of wearing new clothes for Easter – Schmidt writes that “As the gray [sic] of winter and the darkness of Lent and Good Friday gave way to the rebirth of spring and the Resurrection, the sumptuous hues of Easter fashions reflected these

transitions”<sup>30</sup> – it was in the late nineteenth century when retailers began peddling headwear specifically for Easter celebrations: “Trimmed Bonnets and Round Hats, Manufactured for Easter” ran one advertisement in New York in 1878.<sup>31</sup> Today schoolchildren across Britain adorn pastel-hued straw hats with ribbons, flowers, eggs, and toy chicks, and wear them for their Easter celebrations (or at least long enough for their parents to snap a photograph and upload it to social media).

In other instances of the expansion from folk motif into fashion motif, folklore characters or creatures are drawn on for inspiration. The “mermaid dress” is one obvious example; first designed in the 1930s, this form-fitting dress that hugs the hips and then “fishtails” out explicitly connects fashion to the folkloric figure of the mermaid. While “Vampire chic” – characterised by opulent outfits in dark colours, heavy eyeliner, and pale skin – has impacted more than goth culture.<sup>32</sup> An article in the “Fashion and Style” section of *The New York Times* reported in 2009 that “Vampirelike glamour” and “Undead style” were influencing fashion shoots, in such magazines as *W* and Italian *Vogue*.<sup>33</sup>

The red hood of folktale fame – or “chaperon rouge” as we first saw it in Charles Perrault’s seventeenth-century *Histoires et contes du temps passé, avec des moralités* – is a folklore motif well represented in the fashion world. In 2009 *Vogue* US featured a “Little Red Riding Hood” editorial with supermodel Natalia Vodianova wearing a variety of deep red Chanel, Prada, and Moschino outfits as she walked through the woods with a basket of apples or lay amidst the autumn foliage. Occasionally a wolf featured in the shot as well. “‘Little Red Riding Hood’ style couture” was identified as “one of the hottest trends” of 2011 on fashion modelling website *Model Management*, which explained, “The Fall/Winter 2011 catwalks are filled with the most vibrant ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ reds and there are plenty of hoods too – two of the key trends for fall – so expect a huge rush of little red riding hoods walking around town soon”.<sup>34</sup>

There are undoubtedly myriad other examples of folklore inspired fashions, but these suffice to demonstrate their variety and contemporary popularity. And the fact that the love-lock has joined their ranks tells us something about the establishment of this custom. Its commoditisation in the above instances reveals how familiar the love-lock is, as a term and a symbol. What would have been an obscure design feature at the start of the 2000s is now easily recognisable as a love-lock – and not just by me. Fashion houses and retailers are unlikely to draw on a folklore motif that only folklorists could identify. This speaks of the speed of love-lock dissemination within the last fifteen years, and I am certain that a broader geographic focus of love-lock fashion motifs would also reveal the vast spread of the custom.

## Conclusion

Richard Dorson noted in 1950 that folklore is “big business”.<sup>35</sup> The commoditisation of love-locks certainly attests to this. Companies sprang up offering personalised love-lock engraving services: *LoveLocksUK*, *LoveLocks, Inc.*, *MakeLoveLocks*, *Lock-itz*, and so on. Structures have been erected specifically to accommodate love-locks in endeavours to romanticise a place – and entice tourists – such as in Lovelock, Nevada.<sup>36</sup> Love-locks feature as backdrop and motif in numerous films, television shows, and novels, from Korean dramas to *Coronation Street*.<sup>37</sup>

Establishments close to love-lock bridges draw on their symbolism in advertising, such as a café close to Butcher’s Bridge in Ljubljana, Slovenia, named Lockal and featuring padlocks in the design of their logo.<sup>38</sup> Even confectionary has been given the love-lock treatment: for €3.99, you can purchase an 80g milk chocolate love-lock, complete with key, from German chocolatiers Hussel. For the person who “wants to show that love will last forever”, Hussel’s website advertises, “What could express this better than the delicious love lock made of milk chocolate ...?”<sup>39</sup>

The focus of this paper, however, has been on “everyday” fashion, a subject little explored by folklorists. One purpose has therefore been to encourage others to contemplate how the folk motifs they are more familiar with might expand into the fashion world – in the past, present, and perhaps the future. This should not simply be a case of motif-spotting, as Mikel Koven disparagingly phrases it,<sup>40</sup> but an exploration into how folklore subtly pervades so many more aspects of our daily lives than we realise, from ties worn to charms added to bracelets. And as a result of this, far more people are engaging, albeit subconsciously, with folk motifs than we may have originally thought. The woman carrying the “Twist MM LV Love Lock Charms handbag” may never have attached a love-lock to a bridge, but she has still chosen to walk around with one attached to her handbag.

## Notes

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## Illustrations

Figure 1. Love-locks in Leeds Centenary Bridge, October 2016 (Photograph by author)

Figure 2. Love-locks on a bridge in Bakewell, Derbyshire, August 2016 (Photograph by author)

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